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Horat, Esther

Abstract: In the years following the launch of the Open Door policies in Vietnam in the late 1980s, Ninh Hiệp, a peri-urban village located on the edge of Hanoi, has experienced significant economic growth. Due to the expansion of its marketplace, it has become a crucial node for wholesale fabric and ready-made clothing trade in northern Vietnamand was thus hailed as success story. In the spirit of Tania Li (2007) and "The will to improve" this article shows how, by issuing and implementing decrees to establish new and to renovate existing marketplaces, the Vietnamese state attempts to build a "civilised" nation. The article argues that private investors can be seen as new development actors that recently joined the ranks of influential individuals negotiating the road towards modernity—yet rather than being beyond the state, they are in alliance with it. Finally, the article also traces the trend towards private markets in recent years and how this paves the way for an exclusionary development of marketplace trade.Based on twelve months of in-depth ethnographic field research in northern Vietnam in 2012-2013, this article looks closely at the changing, and at times contested, ideas of development and modernity in post-reform Vietnam.

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Willing to improve? Modern marketplaces and civilised trade in a northern Vietnamese village

Esther Horat, Dept. of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

In the years following the launch of the Open Door policies in Vietnam in the late 1980s, Ninh Hiệp, a peri-urban village located on the edge of Hanoi, has experienced significant economic growth. Due to the expansion of its marketplace, it has become a crucial node for wholesale fabric and ready-made clothing trade in northern Vietnam and was thus hailed as success story. In the spirit of Tania Li (2007) and "The will to improve" this article shows how, by issuing and implementing decrees to establish new and to renovate existing marketplaces, the Vietnamese state attempts to build a "civilised" nation. The article argues that private investors can be seen as new development actors that recently joined the ranks of influential individuals negotiating the road towards modernity—yet rather than being beyond the state, they are in alliance with it. Finally, the article also traces the trend towards private markets in recent years and how this paves the way for an exclusionary development of marketplace trade. Based on twelve months of in-depth ethnographic field research in northern Vietnam in 2012-2013, this article looks closely at the changing, and at times contested, ideas of development and modernity in post-reform Vietnam.

Keywords: Civilisation; development; privatisation; marketplace; Vietnam.

Introduction

Mrs Hồng[1], a lifelong trader and one of the first vendors in the covered textile market constructed in 2002, liked to talk about the market and any event, real or hypothetical, related to it. One afternoon in spring 2013, as I was sitting on a small plastic chair in front of her stall, she brought the conversation back to the topic of the market again. Not long into the conversation, she came to speak of a thought that had for a while been forming in her mind. I could detect fervour in her voice as she said: "They want to sell the market to a private investor! But we won't let them just jump in here and take away the market. The market is like a bowl of rice: it's supposed to feed everyone."

A few days later, when I spoke with a former official and leading member of the local old people's club about the market, he explained: "There is a direction to improve the market, but they [the traders] don't listen. They are afraid that they'll lose their stall. They are afraid that a good place will become a bad place."

Statements like the one by Mrs Hồng were frequent during my fieldwork in the northern Vietnamese commune of Ninh Hiệp in 2012-2013. At that time, public markets were renovated throughout Vietnam, or, as it is often called, "improved" (*cải tiến*) or "upgraded" (*nâng cấp*). While being framed in positive or even benevolent terms by officials, many traders, just like Mrs Hồng, reacted with unease or even open confrontation towards such efforts.

In Vietnam, development has been, and to a large extent still is, a core state matter. Like other socialist countries, Vietnam's economic strategy is based on five-year-plans that are drafted during sessions of the National Assembly. Social aspects of development have been targeted by state-led mass organisations such as the Vietnamese Women's Union and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union since the early 1930s, in addition to various professional associations since independence (Taylor et al., 2012: 6). In the aftermath of Đổi mới, a nation-wide policy to transform the planned to a more market-oriented economy introduced in 1986, organisations in

[1] All names in this article are pseudonyms.

the non-profit sector increased in number and diversity, yet were either quasi-governmental or under rather strict control by the Vietnamese state (Sidel, 2010).[2]

At first glance, the Vietnamese experience may appear to deviate from what Daromir Rudnyckyj and Anke Schwittay (2014) describe as a general shift from a developmental to a more managerial state. Upon closer inspection, however, two discernible developments become readily apparent: the involvement of new actors and novel expectations toward citizens. In this sense, one can also conceive of the Vietnamese state as a sort of "incubator" for development. Indeed, enormous infrastructure projects aimed at modernising the country are nowadays often financed by private investors and assume an additional character that is reminiscent of what Tania Li (2007) has dubbed the "will to improve."

Drawing on Foucault's concept of government, Li emphasises the importance of governmental rationality, or, in her own terms, calculation, which is based on two key practices: identifying problems ("problematisation") and making them appear as solvable through technical fixes ("rendering technical") instead of exposing their socio-political root causes (Li, 2007: 6-7). She shows how a range of different development experts devises projects geared at enhancing the villager's capacity for improving their own lives. These schemes do not appear as external imposition, but are subtle interventions that operate by "educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs" to incite the villagers to better their own material conditions (Li, 2007: 5). Thus, by making citizens understand that they are responsible for their own lot and instilling in them the will to improve their lives through techniques of self-government (Foucault, 1991), it is attempted to create a liberal, governable citizenry. This mechanism of "governing *through* the freedom and aspirations of subjects" (Rose, 1996: 155) is at the heart of what many scholars have identified as neoliberal governmentality (Ferguson, 2010; Ferguson and Gupta, 2001; Li, 2007; Ong, 2006; Ong, 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008; Rose 1999). Interestingly, neoliberal forms of self-management can coexist and even be mutually constitutive with socialist logics and eventually help sustain socialist rule (see Nonini, 2008; Ong and Zhang, 2008; Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012).

[2] Due to this situation I avoid the term non-governmental organisations (NGO) in this article.

In this paper, I argue that development in Vietnam is not only about inducing people to improve their own material living conditions, but also to improve themselves in moral terms as Foucault's notion of self-government would have it, that is, their very character, habits and manners. This is attempted via the modernisation of the built environment, which is believed to have a strong influence on people's behaviour. By drawing attention to the newly established markets, this paper also sheds light on the reinforcement of certain gender ideologies that female vendors are complicit in generating, even if unintentional.

The concept of "civilisation" (*văn minh*), ubiquitous in development discourses in contemporary Vietnam, will serve as an entry point into the exploration of different perspectives on, and gendered effects of, improvement. Further, and more specifically, as one realm strongly encouraged by the Vietnamese state in recent years is private investments for infrastructure projects that contribute to modernisation, I will focus on such development processes through public-private partnerships in the context of marketplace renovation. Whether private investors contribute to such projects because they share the will to improve, or, more likely, because they see in them opportunities for lucrative investment, they bring the necessary capital to realise projects the government is sympathetic to. Finally, attention will also be paid to a group of traders active in defending their needs and convictions regarding the terms and direction of state intervention.

From late-socialist growth to neoliberal refinement

For decades, development has been understood to be synonymous with economic growth in Vietnam, especially during the years of socialist planning, when the focus lay on industrialisation (*công nghiệp hóa*) and the strengthening of heavy industry. While these kinds of projects are still being pursued, the quest for modernisation and the proliferation of the neoliberal logic called for a qualitative—and thoroughly moral—dimension in development in recent years and thus helped revive the notion of being "civilised" (Endres, 2014a; Harms, 2016; Leshkowich and Endres, 2018). The following section will analyse the process in more detail and examine what the notion of "civilised" in the context of Vietnamese marketplaces contains.

By adopting the Đổi mới policy in 1986, the Vietnamese government signalled openness towards a wide range of economic activities. Yet, soon after steps were taken to liberalise the economy, some sectors underwent a new round of regulations. A prominent example is small-scale commerce Since the mid-1990s, decrees to redevelop marketplaces all over Vietnam have been issued in regular intervals (see Chính Phủ [Government], 2003; Bộ Công Thương [Ministry of Industry and Trade], 2007, 2015). In 2009, this trend has gained additional impetus through the resolution "Building a New Countryside" (*Chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia xây dựng nông thôn mới*) (Chính Phủ [Government], 2016), which explicitly mentions that rural markets should be upgraded so as to improve commercial networks and boost the local economy. The programme, aiming at modernising the Vietnamese countryside along a 19-point-plan, epitomises–speaking with Li (2007)—"problematisation" and "rendering technical" in that core problems are identified and solutions, which consist largely of building new infrastructure and promoting particular goals, are suggested. What is striking in this scheme is that the state does not appear as the sole actor in development anymore, and that citizens are actively encouraged to participate, at least if they have the financial means to do so. Minh Nguyen (2017: 5) has fittingly coined this the "mobilising state": While the "problems" are detected and defined by the state, the solution is to be (partly) provided by citizens.

Markets were not only included in the resolution Building a New Countryside, but have become targets in the endeavour to modernise the country. While supermarkets and high-end shopping malls for a growing middle class are mushrooming in urban areas, many existing public markets are also undergoing an "upgrade." Such upgrades can either contain the renovation of the market building, or a change of marketplace ownership and its transformation into a commercial centre. The traditional Hàng Da market in Hanoi, bought by a private company, converted into a glittering commercial centre and renamed "Hàng Da Galleria" in 2011, is only one example among many (see Endres, 2014a).

In newspaper articles on urban development as well as in official decrees aimed at marketplace upgrade, "modern" and "civilised" are often mentioned in the same breath. It is not a coincidence that markets in particular are deemed as needing to be civilised, since from early on they were seen as places where manners were not refined

and vulgar language was used (Horat, 2019). According to Ann Marie Leshkowich (2014: 38), in the early 20th century there were already attempts to renovate Bến Thành market in Saigon[3] in the context of the French civilising mission. An article in the newspaper *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn* from the year 1914, that appeared shortly after the opening of the market, celebrated it as a symbol of grandness and hygiene, stating that the Annamese people should be thankful that they are made to progress down the path of civilisation (Leshkowich, 2014: 39). Thus, it was believed that the built environment would have an impact on the behaviour of the people. In other words, an aesthetic environment should have a civilising effect on people and lead them to improve their manners (Harms, 2016; Schwenkel, 2012: 440). This idea is again prevalent in contemporary Vietnam, seamlessly fitting in the trend to power being increasingly exercised in subtle ways (Gainsborough, 2010; Horat, 2017; Nguyen-vo, 2008).

Although the term "văn minh" has become very popular in Vietnam in recent years, what it means is hardly ever defined or spelled out. One exception is the People's Committee of the central Vietnamese city of Đà Nẵng that brings clarification into the matter by stating that the notion of a "civilised market" consists of three criteria: "civilisation," "cleanliness, beauty and hygiene," and "safety" (Uỷ Ban Nhân Dân TP Đà Nẵng [People's Committee of Danang City], 2015). Civilisation is described by a long list, beginning with: hoist the national flag; abide by the state's undertakings, policies and laws as well as the city's regulations; all staff and workers wear a name tag during working hours; not drinking and smoking at the workplace, etc. Regarding traders, it is stated that all of them should wear appropriate attire; have a business attitude and communicate civilly; they must have their business registered; their goods shall be listed by price and sold accordingly; they should not say a wrong price, challenge each other, sell fake goods or goods of poor quality; they shall ensure a proper balance[4]; and at least eighty per cent of the traders should be trained in sales communication; etc. Each criteria's importance is valued by points assigned to it. Interestingly, these so-called civilisation criteria demand not only compliance with regulations and a certain appearance, but also include manners and thus have a strong moral dimension. In other words, much of it has indeed to do with self-mastery and a mode of comportment.

[3] Nowadays referred to as Ho Chi Minh City.

[4] This refers to fabric and other goods, whose price is often calculated by weight.

While being specific to the situation of a marketplace, the criteria in this state-defined guideline are not very different from what Vietnamese citizens generally understand as civilised. For instance, in Erik Harms' (2016) ethnographic account on urban development in the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City, civilised is often associated with orderliness, education, safety, beauty, and with rule-respecting behaviour. Civilisation is a tricky concept: On the one hand, dealing with this term evokes a general unease among anthropologists as "civilisation" is indeed sometimes used as a way of asserting class distinction and can thus function as an instrument of exclusion. On the other hand, the term is not only a tool for wilful domination, but just as much a mechanism for resistance (Harms, 2016: 62-63).

To understand the ideas and hopes attached to the process of development in contemporary Vietnam, examining the notion of being civilised is particularly crucial.
In the remaining article, I will introduce the northern Vietnamese village of Ninh Hiệp, located at the border between Hanoi and Bắc Ninh province, which provides a fitting case to demonstrate the contested meanings "improvement" takes on and also sheds light on different actors and views involved in the transformation of a marketplace. Furthermore, it showcases the continuous advancement of privatisation prevalent in contemporary Vietnam.

Redeveloping the markets

Ninh Hiệp has done comparably well during the subsidy period (1976-1986) as its residents have engaged in commerce to a significant degree next to farming. When cooperatives dissolved and the private sector was not prohibited any longer after the introduction of the Đổi mới policy, even more villagers turned to trade. According to To Duy Hop (1995: 287-88), this shift needs to be understood as the enhancement of traditional skills—such as weaving and knitting—that Ninh Hiệp villagers have been cultivating for many centuries. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the number of traders multiplied as the market area significantly expanded, so much so that at the time the research was conducted all but a handful of households were involved in trade in one way or another. Hence, Ninh Hiệp has become a crucial node for wholesale fabric and clothing trade, serving markets all over Vietnam. Along with the expansion of the market, the living standard of villagers significantly rose. This can clearly be seen in

the large number of colourful villas of three and more storeys replacing the grey, one or two storey houses that were common until about a decade ago. Yet, at the same time, socio-economic differences have also risen as not all households could seize the process to the same degree.

Following the narrow aisles of the old market in Ninh Hiệp, one is in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. Rolls of fabric as well as colourful pieces of cloth, piled up on wooden boards, fill the stalls on both sides of the aisle. Clothing for women and men of all ages, ranging from shirts and sweaters over pants and skirts to socks, underwear, and accessories, complete the picture. While the age spectrum of the more than one thousand sellers goes from about fifteen to over seventy, the majority of stall owners are middle-aged women. Although this state-owned market was only established as a permanent, covered market in 2002, villagers have been trading on its premises for centuries. This long history as well as the traditional look of the market building—a large yellow one-story hall—account for it being called the "old market." Until 2007, the old market has been directly managed by the commune administration. Then, this task was transferred to the Market Management Board (*Ban Quản Lý Chợ*), a body of twenty-four people within the commune's cooperative (*hợp tác xã dịch vụ tổng hợp*) specifically established to manage the old market. Consequently, the administrative work is done by board members in an office of the cooperative, which is next to the commune's People's Committee. During the day, however, board members—all male—in uniforms walk through the market to check if everything is in order. After their rounds, they often sit in groups on benches at the market entrance, chatting, drinking green tea and watching the bustling market activities. There is also a small office inside the market, where they can take a rest, make announcements via loudspeaker, and store equipment for fire extinction.

At this market, traders can lease a stall for five years. If they want to rent the same stall for longer, they can extend the contract. While the Market Management Board rents out the stalls for a small fee, some tenants who retired from business sublease their stall at exorbitant prices instead of giving it back to the Market Management Board. This happens in particular with those stalls located directly at or close to the main path that leads through the market. The further away from the main path the less desirable the location becomes, and hence the cheaper the rental price.

Across the old market are two new multi-storey commercial centres, built in 2011 and funded by private investors. They look markedly different from the old market: With their tiled floor, moving stairs, and straight aisles large enough for a small truck to deliver clothes to the shops, they are perceived as truly modern and are described by villagers as beautiful. Normally, a fresh breeze blows through the aisles, while electric ventilators inside the shop also help to keep traders cool during the summer months. The shops are considerably bigger than those in the old market, allowing traders to sit on chairs instead of on heaps of fabric or squatting on the floor. Some shops are decorated with particular care, for instance with wallpaper, in-laid wooden floors, big mirrors and other comforts normally found in boutiques in cities. The clothes—mostly fashion for young urbanites—are displayed neatly on mannequins or on hangers so as to better catch the attention of potential customers. What is most striking in comparison to the old market (and markets in Vietnam more generally) is the high number of male traders, a phenomenon I will return to shortly.

The two new markets are managed by separate private companies, both of which belong to Ninh Hiệp villagers. One of them is a large real-estate company that also invests in industrial parks, processing plants and apartment buildings outside the village, while the other was solely established for the purpose of managing one of the markets. Finding out more about these two companies proved not easy, however. Once I discovered their offices in the rear of the market building, I realised that the managers were not there most of the time, and even when they were, it was difficult to meet them. When I finally had an appointment with one of them, I was invited into a small office that only contained a desk with a computer, one chair and an empty bookshelf. Upon me asking for a report or any other written information about the market, the manager pointed to the empty shelf so as to emphasise the total absence of documents. The investor of the other market, Mr Trung, had his office in a kind of temporary pavilion, detached from the market. Although there were a few more pieces of furniture, the information I could obtain about the market was equally limited.

When I asked Mr Trung about the differences between the old and the new market, he referred to the fact that traders can lease a stall for fifty years at once, not only for five like at the old market. From this, he concluded that the deal for traders at his market

was clearer than for traders at the old market. The term of lease is in accordance with Art. 67/3 in the Land Law 45/2013/QH13, dated November 29, 2013 (Chính Phủ [Government], 2013), which states that land for commercial and trading activities can be rented for a maximum of fifty years.[5]

Not only can traders at the new markets rely on keeping the stall for fifty years, but since they have to pay the full amount right away, it is also seen as an insurance against an increase in price over time—among the main worries for vendors at the old market. While many found the price of 2 billion VND[6] per stall excessive, some also said that considering it is a long-term investment, it was actually a good deal.

Mr Trung then came to speak about traders and their behaviour: "The traders don't read the market rules; in fact, they are not allowed to just close their stall, they have to announce it. But they never inform us, they just don't come and leave the stall shut." Indeed, no one ever talked about market rules, at least not in my presence. That such a rule even existed thus came as a surprise. Yet, more than any written rules, the built environment seemed to influence traders' behaviour and trading practices. As mentioned above, the bigger stall size not only allowed vendors to display the clothes differently, but also to sit on chairs instead of on the floor. Those with in-laid wooden floor took off their shoes and expected the same of their customers. Also, since the aisles were more spacious and the stalls bigger and enclosed by thin walls or grids, the traders could not talk with one another from their own stall, but had walk over to their neighbour's stall. In the old market in contrast, traders sat close enough to have a conversation when raising their voice. That also means that the noise level at the old market was markedly higher than in the new markets. Finally, as the stalls had iron grids on the sides as well as in the back and front, they could be locked at night, in contrast to the stalls at the old market, where the merchandise was just covered by a piece of cloth. This new stall design serves to create, or at least reinforce, a sense of security by helping keep merchandise safe from theft.

[5] In Vietnam, all land belongs to the people. Land-use rights are managed by the state and can be rented for definite periods of time, depending on the use.
[6] Around 94,800 USD in spring 2013.

These small, but important differences between the old and the two new markets indeed contribute to the latter being perceived as cleaner (in particular inside the shops), quieter, more secure and more orderly, in one word, more "civilised". To be sure, even if the traders praised the new markets as beautiful and modern, none of them ever expressed wanting to be "more civilised."

Although it might seem as though investors were the driving force behind such development projects—and their influence should indeed not be underestimated—they do not have a "free reign." Mr Trung argued that for any kind of renovation of the market, he has to report it first to the authorities. Far from being independent development actors, investors are kept in check, at least officially, by the government. While investors have come to assume a new role in society in that their capital may allow them to pursue some of their interests, they remain in a state of dependence on the state's willingness to issue licences.

Another example for the civilising mission at the marketplace and the strong involvement of the state in it is the regular checks by special police forces (*cảnh sát cơ động*) with the aim of ensuring spatial order. I vividly remember having visited the market right after such a police raid had taken place. Walking through the streets around the old market, something was different but I couldn't quite say what, until I realised how much space there was for motorbikes and pedestrians to pass by each other. Another time, I was walking through the market when, suddenly, all the vendors started hectically taking down the iron bars they had mounted outside their shops as extensions for displaying clothes. Just a few minutes later, a jeep drove down the street with policemen jumping out of it and using their truncheons to tear down whatever was not within the confines of the vendors' shops in unparalleled speed and determination. While this clearly was an exercise in enforcing spatial order and had an immediate and visible effect, the market would, by the next day, look almost exactly as it did before the raid. Such and similar displays of power targeting shop owners as well as roving street vendors were at the time also undertaken in Hanoi and other major towns (Endres, 2014b; Leshkowich, 2014). Some of those actions got out of hand and created great anxiety and discontent among citizens faced with this excessive use of state power, as Allison Truitt described for a raid of a gold shop in Ho Chi Minh City in 2014 (Truitt, 2018). In the case of Ninh Hiệp, raids like the above-

mentioned one did not seem to come as a great suprise though. Rather than resisting or negotiating, the traders complied with the police, knowing they could re-erect their stall as soon as the police would have left the village. What is interesting here is therefore not so much the spectacle of power, but rather the role of the police within the state-driven civilising mission and the ways in which traders react to this civilising mission.

Indeed, even if spatial contours often have an impact on the people's behaviour, they do not necessarily go uncontested. Rules of orderliness for the sake of a "more civilised appearance" was not something traders in Ninh Hiệp were ready to respect. In addition to limiting the space within which they could engage in trade-related activities, these rules as well as other measures to transform the marketplace clashed with their ideas about the look and function of a traditional marketplace, and, most importantly, about its purpose: for traders, the market was first and foremost a place where everyone should be able to make a living. At the same time, trading clearly was understood to be a social activity. Vendors selling nearby often maintained close relationships and supported each other in daily tasks. However, with the growing distance between their stalls, they had to make more effort to cultivate their ties to the same extent as before.

Tellingly, these types of police raids would only be directed at the shops around the old market. These shops, located on the ground floor of residential houses, appeared spontaneously when the old market reached its limit in offering selling space to ever more vendors. That these shops were targeted seems to empirically confirm Leshkowich's (2005) argument centring on the term "feminine disorder," which she saw as a discursive strategy utilised by those in power to forge a strong connection between the female and chaos. Although used to describe the predicament of women street vendors in Ho Chi Minh City who were banned from pavements and public places at different times, the term seems to aptly capture the current official perspective on Ninh Hiệp's old market. It is noteworthy that the parts of the market where almost all traders are women were said to be chaotic and thus were targeted by the raids. The new markets, in contrast—branded as "modern," "beautiful," "civilised" and "orderly"—were dominated by male traders, a very rare species in Vietnam, where petty trade has been and still is seen as a typical female activity.

While a handful of male vendors at the new markets were in their forties and fifties, the age of the other stall tenants ranged from sixteen to around thirty-five. Most of these young men were the sons or husbands of traders who already had a stall inside or on the street leading to the old market. Thus, obtaining a stall at one of the new markets can be seen as a strategy of diversification and intensification: Rather than trading one place for another, vendors tended to acquire additional stalls if they had the means to do so. As the majority of these young men stayed at home or had occasional jobs prior to the market boom, their inclusion in the textile trade needs to be seen as a strategy to seize the opportunity of increasing the household income.

The main reason for the traders at or around the old market for not moving to the new markets themselves was that they were afraid of losing the already established clientele if their customers had to find them at another location in the market. Also, most vendors were on good terms with their stall neighbours as a result of cultivating these social bonds for many years. Thus, while using men's labour to tend additional stalls could increase the household income, this spatial arrangement potentially strengthened the image of women as chaotic and in need of improvement.

Privatising the village

The two privately built markets in Ninh Hiệp are a testament to the pervasive reality of market transformation. In addition, since 2010 ongoing rumours have suggested that the old market may be sold to private investors in the near future. These rumours did not appear by chance: According to my conversation in March 2013 with Mr Vinh, a leading member of the local cooperative that has managed the old market since 2007, government authorities at all levels would like to transfer the old market to a private investor. It would then be possible to renovate it extensively. As long as the market is managed by the cooperative, it is the property of all villagers and cannot be renovated on the initiative of one person, and even if everyone would agree, the money available for it would never come close to the amount a private investor could put in. Mr Vinh, originally from Ninh Hiệp and still living there at the time of this research, seemed to be caught between two sides: the higher authorities who tried to push towards privatisation and to whom he was accountable; and the villagers who strongly opposed

this move and among whom he and his family lived. In that same conversation, Mr Vinh said:

> I was asked to draft a market redevelopment plan, which I did. Although having submitted it [to the district authorities] over a year ago, I still haven't heard back. I informed the villagers about the plan [to redevelop and privatise the market] but they didn't listen. No matter who the investor is, they only say the cooperative should continue to manage the market. In that case, the fees will remain low: the stall rent fee, the parking fee, and all other fees, and so they are more relaxed. If a private investor wants to take over the old market, the traders will protest again like in July 2010, when this was attempted for the first time. As for myself, I only follow the will of the villagers: if they want the cooperative to manage the market, I will do so. If they do not trust me anymore, I will certainly not be able to do it. No one can manage the market without their trust.

That Mr Vinh's statement would not only hold true for the privatisation of the old market, but for the expansion of private markets more generally (especially at the cost of the old market), would become clear less than a year later. In January 2014, a third private market project was announced, officially to solve what was considered the main problem of the old market from the state's perspective: the insufficient fire protection, worsened by the high density of traders. Thus, the idea was to provide an additional space where a portion of the traders from the old market could shift. Since this market would replace a secondary school and the parking lot of the old market the plans were met with strong resistance from local residents and traders. The relocation of the parking lot caused worries among the traders because they feared that no customers would come to the old market anymore if the motorbikes could not be parked nearby. Consequently, two major protests were organised, drawing hundreds of villagers to the streets and in front of the commune's People's Committee. The first protest happened in January 2014, just as the plan for the project was announced. The second major protest was organised in December 2015, when the demolition of the parking lot started. In the time between, a number of smaller protests were held, some even in Hanoi. Regardless of the traders' worries, the vice-president of the district framed the project as providing a much-needed push to turn Ninh Hiệp into a modern town, while at the same time satisfying the local people's desire for another commercial centre. In short, the new markets are praised as essential to make Ninh

Hiệp into a modern town.

The same attitude also permeates the directives of the district's People's Committee towards the commune's People's Committee. As Nguyen Giao (2018) describes, they come out of a meeting with traders and two meetings with the investors during the protests at the beginning of January 2014. These directives contain two main instructions for the commune's People's Committee: one is to ensure the lawful course of action of the investors; the second is to engage directly with citizens to "help them understand the legal situation" as well as to "make them aware of the lack of beauty and the danger regarding the environment and security if the empty land is abandoned" (see Nguyen, 2018: 780).[7] Just as the quote of a former official at the beginning of this article already suggests, traders are portrayed as not being able to grasp the advantages—let alone the aesthetics—that another market would bring about.

However, many traders selling at the old market see this very differently. Most especially these include the "original traders"—i.e., mostly middle-aged women like Mrs Hồng who was mentioned at the beginning—who were already traders prior to Đổi mới and supported the first market in 2002. This particular group of traders is at the forefront of the effort to keep the old market a public property. Initially, the stalls at the old market were allotted to those traders who had already financially contributed to building it. The cost of the stall varied depending on its location, but the differences were not remarkable. Ten years later, as I was conducting this research, the difference in value between the stalls along the main aisle and those in the back of the market felt immense. Those traders in the least desirable parts of the market were also the most vulnerable ones in the face of the state's push for market transformation as they would not be able to afford higher stall rent fees, an unavoidable consequence of extensive renovation. Thus, these traders feared being managed by a private company and were outspoken about their appreciation of communal management. They also expressed solidarity with one another on multiple occasions because, for them, the market formed their main source of income. One of these traders, who openly talked about the necessity to protect the market from being sold was Mrs Dung. She said:

[7] „Empty land" refers to a swath of land next to the school, one part of which was used for planting rice and the other part as a graveyard. Moving the graveyard was another worrisome issue for Ninh Hiệp villagers and was mentioned in the same meeting as an undertaking that needed to be carried out with care. According to the project plan, the whole parcel of land—the land of the school as well as the empty land—would be used for the new market.

> This is a market, it belongs to everybody, not to one person with a lot of money. We don't want to depend on anybody. The market is our bread and butter (*miếng cơm manh áo*, lit.: rice and shirt). When somebody has finished school, has no job, they can sell at the market. We don't want a company to step in. They say they want to build a second and a third floor, and that we could stay on the ground floor. But reconstruction costs a lot of money. Once they have built more floors, they will raise our stall rent fee, too.

Later in the conversation, Mrs Dung said the traders would in fact like to renovate part of the building, especially the roof. If it was raised and another material used, the market would be much cooler and the air less stuffy during the hot season. However, they thought it crucial to use their own money so as to avoid being dependent on a third party. Mrs Dung suggested that, in the same manner as when the market was built, every trader should now support its renovation. It would be fair if everyone would pay according to the size and location of his or her own stall, she said, so as to assure a level of control over the market.

Thus, the traders in Ninh Hiệp are not against improvements to the market per se. In fact, they are the ones who suffer most from the inconveniences related to its current arrangements: the stuffy air and the almost unbearable temperatures during the summer months, the back pain accrued from squatting and carrying heavy bags of merchandise to their stalls, and the very poor sanitation. Nonetheless, the traders are reluctant to demand albeit modest changes, fearing that their demands will be interpreted erroneously as a cry for a "modern market" and by extension more privatisation. The purpose of the protests, then, was not to demand changes to the existing market but to restrain the impact of the new markets on the old.

Conclusion

This special issue is an attempt to address the topic of development influenced from outside the rigid confines of the state. In line with this special issue's overarching theme, this article has looked at developmental trends in a small Vietnamese village called Ninh Hiệp.

As has been shown, visions of "improvement" differ starkly between investors, vendors and the state. While investors equate improvement with financial profit, the state envisions a modern and civilised nation, and vendors simply want a more

comfortable market environment. These contested ideas of improvement are directly related to the built environment and property ownership, and thus finally revolve around the question of control. The layout and orderliness of the new markets do not only contribute to safety and security—a point often mentioned in explanations by the government about the benefits of new markets—but most importantly allow for a better control of what is going on in the market. For vendors, however, these kinds of markets lead to a loss of control over their own livelihoods. In that sense, this article sheds light on the combined efforts of development actors and the state to govern and regulate the lives of its citizens.

Are traders in Ninh Hiệp themselves willing to improve, or are they merely passive or reluctant receptors of the state's notions of progress? One of the article's goals has been to demonstrate how traders are not only willing but eager to improve the physical and sanitary conditions in the old marketplace. They even have concrete ideas about how to go about it. However, the kind of improvement they are suggesting is not geared towards economic growth or becoming "more civilised." Rather, the changes they propose are pragmatic, with the goal of facilitating their everyday life at the market and levelling out growing socio-economic differences.

The traders' challenge to privatising logics led to debates over the form and function of marketplaces as well as the desired trajectory of their evolution. Yet, even if the traders do not agree with the state's efforts to upgrade the village, they cannot always avert these processes. At times, they are even complicit in generating outcomes they did not actively support in the first place, e.g., the reinforcement of certain gender ideologies by adapting them to the new market situation.

The other argument pursued in this article was a critical engagement with what Tania Li calls the "will to improve." As mentioned earlier, Li understands the state's role in development to be purely material and economic. This conception of development, however, does not adequately explain all the dynamics at work within the context of markets in Ninh Hiệp. The "will to improve" can also be seen in the attempt to "civilise" people and soften manners and not solely in making them improve their own material conditions. But changes in manners do not follow automatically when enforced through decrees and regulations, but are rather a consequence of transformations in the built environment (e.g., marketplace) and are therefore rather

difficult to oppose.

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